

Victorian Environment Groups
Letter to the Premier of Victoria, John Brumby
Support & Strengthen the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC)



Geelong Environment Council Inc



Devilbend Landcare Group



Upper Yarra & Dandenongs Environment Council

The Premier John Brumby
1 Treasury Place
East Melbourne VIC 3002

10 June 2010

Dear Premier,

Support and strengthen the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council

As Victoria's twenty leading environment groups, representing tens of thousands of Victorians, we are writing to express our strong support for the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC).

We were disappointed and gravely concerned to see proposals by the government to essentially abolish the independence of what has been an extremely successful and uniquely Victorian institution.

After a Green Paper and two years of consultation, the Victorian Government in "*Securing Our Natural Future: A white paper for land and biodiversity at a time of climate change, 2009*" proposes to amalgamate VEAC, the Victorian Coastal Council and the Victorian Catchment Management Council into a consolidated Victorian Natural Resource & Catchment Council. While retaining the capacity to establish action groups and appoint specific advisory panels on a case-by-case basis, this essentially abolishes the independent role of a standing independent investigative body.

This is very disappointing. Not only had the idea never been mentioned in the numerous reference groups and discussions in development of the White Paper, it is a huge policy backflip. Previous Labor (and Liberal) governments have supported VEAC and its predecessors over the past 40 years. Only the National Party has had a policy to abolish VEAC.

Indeed in its first term, the Bracks Government attempted to *expand* the role of VEAC to include investigation of private land as well as public land. Now the Brumby Government is essentially abolishing VEAC, to replace it with some vaguely defined advisory boards which could be established and abolished at the whim of the government.

VEAC and its predecessors the Environment Conservation Council (ECC) and Land Conservation Council (LCC) have served Victoria well for almost 40 years as an arm's length, independent and expert source of advice and recommendations on complicated and sometimes divisive land use issues. The key strengths of VEAC and its predecessors have been:

- Arm's length and thorough investigation of complex ecological and land use issues.
- Expert scientific advice free of departmental and political interference.
- Transparent, thorough and thoughtful public and stakeholder consultation process.
- Reporting to parliament as well as the government and the community.

VEAC is a respected Victorian institution, and scrapping it would undervalue the conservation efforts of any government. Victoria is one of the most cleared states in Australia, with a large proportion of its natural areas fragmented and under pressure from a history of intensive development, leading to increasing numbers of threatened species and habitat decline.

Climate change will make all this worse, and there will be new challenges in how we protect and manage ecosystems across Victoria. VEAC has the skills and expertise to carry out future work in this area and should be the obvious choice for any government.

We call on the Brumby Government to review its decision to abolish VEAC, and instead support and expand VEAC. We are seeking the following commitments:

- Commit to retaining the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC).
- Strengthen the role of VEAC with a greater focus on landscape-scale and cross-tenure outcomes.
- Instruct VEAC to investigate the condition of and management options for freshwater-dependent ecosystems (including groundwater).
- Instruct VEAC to undertake a new assessment into marine and coastal biodiversity and the establishment of new marine parks.

The VNPA has to date collected over 2400 names for a petition calling on the Victorian Government to increase support for and strengthen the role of VEAC as a stand-alone statutory body that provides independent and strategic advice to the government and people of Victoria on matters relating to the protection and ecologically sustainable management of the environment and natural resources across the state. These names are attached in attachment I.

We also request the opportunity to meet and discuss this important issue with you. If you require additional information please contact Matt Ruchel, VNPA Executive Director, (03) 9341 6504.

On behalf of Victorian environment & conservation groups.

Yours sincerely,

Matt Ruchel
Executive Director
Victorian National Parks Association

Kelly O'Shanassy
Chief Executive Officer
Environment Victoria

Gavan McFadzean
Victorian Campaign Manager
The Wilderness Society

Richard Hunter
Chief Executive Officer
Bird Observation & Conservation Australia

Attachment I: Petition of , 2437 signatures (673 web, 1764 hard copy): “ *We the undersigned call on the Victorian Government to increase support and strengthen the role of the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council (VEAC) as a stand-alone statutory body that provides independent and strategic advice to the government and people of Victoria on matter relating to the protection and ecologically sustainable management of the environment and natural resources across the state*”.